

Not in God's Image

**A Comparative Study of Women's Body Image
in Pagan, Jewish, and Buddhist Religions**

by

Catherine Rahaim

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A Comparative Study of Women's Body Image in Pagan, Jewish, and Buddhist Religions

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Dedication

To Dave—my husband, my best friend, and my greatest supporter, and to Elizabeth, Michelle, and Mom—in whom I find the greatest evidence of the image of God.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Paul D. Hanson of Harvard Divinity School for his patience, assistance, and generosity in guiding me through the research and development of my thesis paper. I am humbled by Dr. Hanson's knowledge of history and theology, and his skill as an educator.

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Introduction

In our self-centered world, we tend to focus on progress, and we create a rubric to quantify progress which is cemented in the values and aspirations we hold today. One case in point is the connotation of “civilization.” Having satisfied the rubric requirements of group living, division of labor, intellectual achievements like devising a calendar, and technological achievements like use of metal, an area qualifies for the title “civilization.” But civilization is not necessarily a goal; other forms of group living may, in fact, be more satisfying and even, more peaceful.

The same scrutiny could be applied to religion. When a set of beliefs is deemed a “religion,” the rubric applied, albeit, sometimes subconsciously, is organization, institutional leadership, faith, and commitment. In contrast, we look into our past where we find pantheons of gods and fantastic stories, and call that “mythology” – the connotations being “allegorical” or “naïve” beliefs. Perhaps part of the reason is that figures which today have less empowerment, excel in power in mythology – animals, nature, and even, women.

As people became “civilized,” women got lost. Certainly most of the world’s mythologies abound with stories of goddesses, and quite frequently, it is a goddess who created all that is – people, nature, and other gods. History, on the other hand, is laughingly called “his-story,” since so little written accounts exist which tell “her-story.” Religion, too, is his-story, and women are a meager part of religious history.

But archeological excursions in the past half century have increased our understanding of women's placement in history and religion. Pairing the archeological evidence with mythology allows us to entertain the theory that at one time god was conceived as a woman. The greatest reason must have been her body – the fact that women have menstrual cycles which parallel nature's cycles, and women give birth.

The image of god as woman is foreign to our “sophisticated,” modern-rubric minds because in our written past to our present time, male leadership and male-envisioned god have been the norm. In ancient Greek society, and in developing Judaism and Buddhism women struggled to find a place. But woman's “place” in religion has focused less on her inherent abilities and intelligence, than on her physical space.

Though she was once elevated for her body's mysteries, women in these religions were regulated, demoted, or, at the least, sanctioned because her body was viewed as a threat to power and control - economically, politically, and socially. Examining the extent to which a woman's physical attributes and body image have determined her roles in religion requires delving into archeology, mythology, and religious law or doctrine.

Chapter 1

Woman as Mother Goddess

Woman's "place" in religion has focused less on her inherent abilities and intelligence than on her physical space. Though she was once elevated for her body's mysteries, women in these religions were regulated, demoted, or, at the least, sanctioned because the female form was viewed as a threat to power and control—economically, politically, and socially. Examining the extent to which a woman's physical attributes and body image have determined her roles in religion requires delving into archeology, mythology, and religious law or doctrine.

Interpretations of Mother Goddess Iconography

In addition to animistic beliefs, Paleolithic and Neolithic worshippers appear to have reproduced the female form often enough to create a controversy among archeologists and historians concerning the meanings behind those female representations. That debate is worthy of research for many reasons. Any artifacts which can be dated 9,000 or 25,000 or even 70,000 years into our past are rare and give us a glimpse into a prehistory characterized by huge gaps in information. Artifacts refined enough to be gender-specific by emphasizing certain physical attributes pose questions of motive. Carol Christ examines cultural symbols and agrees with anthropologist Clifford

Geertz that symbols which are religious “define the deepest values of a society and the persons in it.”¹

Drawn and carved female images make up some of the earliest dated artifacts, and some of these appear in configurations that resemble temple sites. One Upper Paleolithic culture that developed into a Neolithic state is identified as Gravettian-Aurigna (or simply Aurignacian) and has been traced from a plain in southern France that extends into Siberia. Along several areas of that plain, female imagery dating to 70,000 BCE and later has been excavated. In Dolni Vestonice, Russia, for example, mammoth skulls and tusks incised with female likenesses and arranged in a grouping have been unearthed.² Individual artifact specimens obtained there and in Austria and Spain have common themes of plump female figures emphasizing large breasts and pregnant-like protruding stomachs, although some are slim figures.³ Representing a later date of 35,000 BCE are women likenesses, often amulets, of clay, ash, bone, and ivory from the same area. These have disproportionately large breasts and vulvas.⁴ According to Marija Gimbutas, there are over 3000 sites in southeast Europe from which approximately 30,000 miniature sculptures of this type have been found.⁵ In Les Eyzies in southwest France, a fourteen-

¹Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess.” *Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982) 72.

²Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 157.

³Lotte Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 5.

⁴Adele Getty, *Goddess Mother of Living Nature* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1990) 8.

⁵Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 146.

inch reindeer antler identified by Abbe Breuil as “the Montgaudier baton,” was dated as 32,000 years old and is engraved with markings that he said were hunting images and indiscernible scratchings. Alexander Marshack, with the help of enhanced technology twenty years later identified the “scratchings” as the head of an ibex with crescent horns and a budding flower as a vulva.⁶ Later, Adele Getty noted marks that indicate a pregnancy lunar calendar,⁷ similar to a calendar located in California in a Yurok Indian site.

Caves, which are the pallets of prehistoric art, also show female forms. Several cave drawings in France are routinely analyzed as hunting scenes, but some, like Eisler, maintain that many hunting scenes, such as those at La Ferrassie, Pergouset, and Laline, are really abstract or naturalistic engravings and carvings of women’s vaginas.⁸ Stone slabs with carvings of female figures on them were located face-down in a cave at Le Roc, and in Lascaux and La Magdelaine, female nudes appear on cave walls near hunting scenes.⁹

Pre-Aryan sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in India, which date to the third millennium BCE, have also been excavated and reveal similar female forms as those found earlier in Europe and Asia. The forms sometimes appear human-like but more often have an ethereal other-worldly aspect. The usual portrayals are those of a pregnant

⁶Raine Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 54-55.

⁷Getty 146.

⁸Eisler 55.

⁹Getty 9.

figure, mother and child in an embrace, semi-nude figures bedecked with crescent-shaped jewelry, and nude figures clasping breasts and depicting the yoni, or vagina.¹⁰ It was fairly common in ancient times to worship the yoni as an object of great mystery and a sanctuary of the divine.

The island of Crete, whose Minoan civilization flourished in the third and second millennium BCE, has revealed murals and artifact likenesses of the female, regularly enthroned, and physically exaggerated.¹¹

The Neolithic site of Jericho (9550 BCE) when excavated revealed images of the female form inside every house and a temple-like structure containing a stone carved with breasts.¹²

In Turkey's earliest cities of Hacilar and Catal Huyuk, dating about 5600 BCE, James Mellaart excavated human representations that were almost exclusively female figures. One terra cotta figure shows a female figure with huge breasts and belly, seated and giving birth.¹³ In other plaster reliefs the female is birthing bulls, and in some, wild animals protrude through the female breasts, and teeth and tusks take the place of nipples.¹⁴

The iconographic evidence provides the framework of an ongoing debate that erupted when, in the 1960s and 1970s, Merlin Stone and others interpreted the artifacts as

¹⁰Getty 14.

¹¹Getty 21.

¹²Getty 21.

¹³Getty 12.

¹⁴Getty 11.

signs of widespread ancient goddess worship by matriarchal societies.¹⁵ That theory is refuted vehemently by some and tempered by others.

A number of researchers challenge Mother Goddess and matriarchy theories that are formulated on these artifacts and cave drawings, citing misinterpretation of fat females for pregnant females and even feminist exaggeration. Robert Sheaffer's article entitled "Feminism, The Noble Lie," makes his stance clear. However, rather than dealing directly with the archeological evidence, he sees the concept of a Mother Goddess as one more example of what he calls "male-bashing." He claims that not only is there insufficient evidence to support a goddess theory, but that merely challenging the Mother Goddess theory makes one appear unchivalrous and guilty. Without providing an alternative theory, Shaeffer dismisses Mother Goddess talk as simply deceit.¹⁶ Lotte Motz does address the evidence directly, and she also takes umbrage with the conclusion drawn by Stone. While she, as well, notes the prominent female features on most statuettes, she claims they do not give indications of pregnancy, a condition that is appropriate to creation. Although the woman's body does "bulge . . . her thighs and buttocks, not organs of reproduction, are proportional in size . . . Nor need long, sagging breasts," [she claims] "point to the state of pregnancy."¹⁷ Motz also repudiates the idea of caves and cave art focusing on women's issues. She finds no listing of female

¹⁵Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 13-15.

¹⁶Robert Sheaffer, "Feminism, The Noble Lie." *Free Inquiry*. Online. Expanded Academic ASAP. Gale Infotrac. Spring 1995: v15 n2 p13 (5).
[www.http://web1.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark](http://web1.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark) 15 Nov 2002.

¹⁷Motz 10.

figurines unearthed in caves, but in settled areas nearby, such as near Laussel.¹⁸ Sally Binford also discusses caves, but she points out that cave art includes pictures of animals as well as women; to draw religious conclusions from this art is, in her words, “silly.”¹⁹ Cynthia Eller agrees on the issue of diversity of subjects found in the drawings and figurines of the ancient Near East and ancient Europe, and she lists as subjects in addition to women, “wavy lines, chevrons, triangles, snakes, butterflies, birds, fish, spiders, eggs,” and even phalluses.²⁰

There are more moderate voices which take issue with the Mother Goddess concept. One is Adele Getty who is actually an advocate of the Mother Goddess theory but takes exception to the idea of matriarchy. Total supporters of the theory maintain that during the third and second millennia, even the role men played in reproduction was not understood, so women were thought to be the only parent. But Getty describes a sculpture from Catal Huyuk which shows on one side a couple in an embrace and on the other, a mother and child, which may imply knowledge of reproduction. In addition, she says, at this particular site there were no phallic images or vulvas in representations.²¹ Finally, Judith Baskin who concentrates her work in this area on its connection to emerging Judaism, agrees that there are many images of females holding breasts in art forms from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, but rather than necessarily implying

¹⁸Motz 185.

¹⁹Sally Binford, “Are Goddesses and Matriarchies Merely Figments of Feminist Imagination?” *The Politics of Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday) 559.

²⁰Eller 160.

²¹Getty 13.

Mother Goddess worship, it “implies reverence for or appeal to the power of the feminine in everyday Israelite religious life.”²²

Given the uncanny recurrence of similar women body images found in these early archeological sites, it is appropriate to hypothesize that woman’s body was deified. In addition, since the emergence of life—in animal, human, or nature’s form—from these female figures is a familiar theme, the female because of her body must have been linked to creation, not to just agricultural fertility. I find these temples and images are evidence of a female deity or Mother Goddess in those Neolithic sites excavated in southern and western Asia and Europe. Even the cave, Getty maintains, was perceived as an earthly womb, and those cave paintings at places like Lascaux show more than the connection between hunting rites and appeals to a Mother Goddess.²³

Architecture and accouterments linked to the female figures indicate the divine aspect of the figure and its connection to nature, particularly the moon. In Harappa, for example, there are female figures whose heads are adorned with crescent-shaped headdresses, are bird-like, or have goat’s horns—“a universal symbol of renewal often associated with the crescent moon.”²⁴ The Jericho settlement was contrived in a crescent shape with beehive-shaped houses. These recurrent shapes reinforce the idea of the parallel cycles of womanhood and the moon. Getty speculates that women may have

²²Judith R. Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1998) 37.

²³Getty 9.

²⁴Getty 14.

seen a connection between the rhythms of nature and their internal biological rhythms, thereby forging the earliest basis of science and religion.²⁵

Mythological Evidence of Mother Goddess Worship

Mythology reflects the spiritual beliefs and cultural norms of a developing society, and if Mother Goddess worship was widespread, it would have to be part of the oral tradition. And it is. That oral tradition was preserved—although, according to Albert Lord, in a less dramatic and personal way—when the written tradition began.²⁶

The heartland of Mother Goddess worship was at least in three of the four first civilizations: Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India. The larger concentric circle of believers enveloped Turkey, Crete, and Greece. The Mother Goddess was clearly more than a fertility figure, and her adherents made up more than just a cult of followers.

Mythologies of these areas identify her in many roles—lawmaker of the universe, prophetess, provider of human destinies, inventor, healer, hunter, warrior²⁷—and most importantly, creator and Queen of Heaven. Joseph Campbell says that mythology

²⁵Getty 8.

²⁶Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. (New York: Atheneum, 1965) 124-138.

²⁷Stone 3-4.

presents her as representing time and space, that everything, including the gods is created by her, and that she is identical with the universe.²⁸

In the Fertile Crescent, as elsewhere, the goddess figure is identified by many names. According to Frank Cross, polytheism in the Near East was characterized by a syncretistic impulse, wherein major or minor deities having similar characteristics and functions merged or were shared by surrounding cultures.²⁹ For example, Ninhursag(a) of Sumer was also known as Mah, Ninmah, Nintu(r) and Aruru, and she was especially noteworthy for creation and resurrection.³⁰ Thorkild Jacobsen, who traces 4th to 2nd millennium Mesopotamian religion explains that the title “Nintur” means “Lady Birth Hut,” and it is for that creative role that this goddess was revered. The “tur” part of the name was written at one time with a pictogram of a cattle pen where cows birthed, and in Sumerian, “tur” was the word for “womb.” In Akkadian, “Nintur” was “Sassuru,” “The Lady of the Womb,” and her symbol, like the Greek “omega,”—Ω—represented the uterus of a cow.³¹ Early graves in the city of Ur (4th millennium BCE) include Ninhursag/Nintur’s image usually spreading her knees as a birth giver³² and support the idea that she was one of the most powerful deities of a trilogy that also included An and Enlil. In 4th millennium reliefs, Nintur is nursing a child, while other children peek from

²⁸“Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth/Interview With Bill Moyers.” 1989. PBS. WGBH, Boston. 2 Jan 2003.

²⁹Frank Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 49.

³⁰Getty 17.

³¹Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) 106-107.

³²Jacobsen 108.

around her dress, and embryos surround her.³³ Although she was considered the creator of gods and men, she had no political role.

It was with Inanna (Innin, Nana) from Sumer, however, that the first mention of rising from the dead appears in mythology, and it reappears in the Babylonian epics concerning another goddess figure, Ishtar (Ishara). Jacobsen questions the chronology of these two figures and, although it is unclear, suggests that Inanna may have been of Semitic origin and was “borrowed” from Ishtar.³⁴ Inanna was worshipped in Sumer as, among other things, a goddess of rain, and the clouds were perceived to be her breasts from which life-sustaining rain poured. In addition, there are several cuneiform tablets which reveal stories about her ill-fated, but much romanticized, marriage to Dumuzi, a shepherd who wooed her with the help of Inanna’s brother Utu. One wedding text called “The Blessing of the Bridegroom” finds Inanna praising her young body soon to be made one with her new husband. She first likens her pubic triangle to a ceremonial barge of heaven (the crescent of the new moon) and her pubic hair as mooring ropes, and later she compares her body to a virgin plot in the desert which will soon be cultivated:

My encased parts so nailed down as with linchpins to a big cart, (my crescent-shaped) “Barge of Heaven” so well belayed, full of loveliness, like a new moon, my untilled plot, left so fallow in the desert, my duck field so studded with ducks, my hillock land, so well-watered, my parts, piled up. I, being but a maiden, who will be their ploughman? My parts, well-watered lowlands, I being but a lady, who will put plough oxen to them?³⁵

³³H. Frankfort, H.A. Frankfort, John Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen. *Before Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1949) 158.

³⁴Jacobsen 140-141.

³⁵Frankfort 45.

Unfortunately, Dumuzi's death soon after their marriage overwhelms Inanna, and she ventures to the netherworld in search of him. This myth, also recorded on the Uruk Vase of the 4th millennium, appears to have been "the central event of the rite of sacred marriage."³⁶ Returning from the netherworld is not easy for Inanna though, and in at least one myth, Inanna is allowed to leave only when Dumuzi and his sister agree to take half-year turns to remain in the land of the dead.³⁷

North of Sumer, Ishtar was seen as the divine creator. An address dated between the eighteenth and seventh centuries BCE clarifies what people assumed was her role:

Unto her who renders decision, Goddess of all things, Unto the Lady of Heaven and Earth who receives supplication; Unto Her who hears petition, who entertains prayer; Unto the compassionate Goddess who loves righteousness; Istar the Queen, who suppresses all that is confused. To the Queen of Heaven, the Goddess of the Universe, the One who walked in terrible Chaos and brought life by the Law of Love; And out of Chaos brought harmony.³⁸

Inanna and Ishtar share identity with Asherah, the Great Goddess of the Canaanite area. In fact, all three bore the titles of goddess of rain, of war, and of the morning and evening star.³⁹ Asherah, whom Stone claims was given a new name (Boseth) and male gender by the time of the writing of the Hebrew Bible Chronicles, was also known as Anahita, Anat, Ashtart, Astarte, Ashtoreth, Attar, and Hathor.⁴⁰

³⁶Jacobsen 26.

³⁷Jacobsen 57-61.

³⁸Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999) 37.

³⁹Jacobsen 140-141.

⁴⁰Stone 9.

In Egypt, the whole heavenly sphere was identified with Nut, who swallowed the sun at night, allowed it to pass through her body and released it at daybreak. She was also called the Queen of Heaven and wife of Geb, the earth.

Pre-Greek sites and ancient Greece have multi-levels of Mother Goddess images. In the earliest one, the Pelagian myth identifies the Great Mother as Eurynome, who was alone in the beginning of time when there was nothing but void. Her motions created chaos, and from that, air, which she rubbed to create a serpent. An egg was the product of their pairing, an egg that, when hatched, created all things, and Eurynome organized time and space.⁴¹ At pre-Greek sanctuaries, a goddess identified as Gaia was worshipped as the goddess of divine revelation,⁴² and it is she whom Hesiod described in his *Theogony* as the divine creator. Later, Demeter, whose name may even linguistically refer to “mother,” evolved from a fertility goddess to “the mistress of the human quest for salvation, a goddess of the life of women, and the creator.”⁴³ As such, Demeter-worshippers created beehive tombs in Greece to reflect her title as pure Mother Bee and her priestesses were called *melissae*, plural of “bees.”⁴⁴

In India, the Goddess Sakti has survived somewhat intact as the Goddess of Energy, and in sacred texts, as the universal creator. “According to French Indologist

⁴¹Getty 6-7.

⁴²Motz 125.

⁴³Motz 137-138.

⁴⁴Getty 11.

Alain Danielou, she is the origin of the phenomenal world, and the conscious plan of creation.”⁴⁵

Fisher, utilizing the reinterpretations of archeological sites during the 20th century, notes several other world locations and their Mother Goddess equivalents: Nu Kwa of China, Coatlique of the Aztec peoples, Fregja of Scandinavia, and Great Spider Woman of the Pueblo peoples.⁴⁶

Women’s Status in Mother Goddess Areas

Belief in and awe of the female deity and her creative powers were transferred to women whose reproductive cycles yielded life as did the deity’s. That accounts, Herodotus says, for the great respect accorded to women in Egypt. But transferring that respect into political power and leadership of the community, as best-known proponents Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler do, does not necessarily follow. Except for Stone’s contention of ritual regicide, I find no evidence of political leadership by women in Mother Goddess groups. James Mellaart, who excavated the Anatolian sites, saw no evidence of central authority, military leadership, or, in fact, even warfare and sacrifice. Instead he found evidence of worship of women.⁴⁷ Although the theory of ancient matriarchies has little proof, clearly women had social and economic powers resulting from the respect accorded them through biology. Archeologists James Frazer and

⁴⁵Getty 6.

⁴⁶Fisher 37.

⁴⁷Lerner 34.

Margaret Mead agree that coitus was not initially understood as associated with childbirth.⁴⁸ Spretnak points out that among some native Australians of the 20th century, it was believed that women were impregnated by the wind.⁴⁹ Since parentage was only clearly the woman's domain, matrilineal societies seem logical; but this refers to lineage tracing and not necessarily political leadership. Even in matrilineal societies, though, decisions emanate from the woman's family (usually her brother); the decision making still rests with males.⁵⁰

Women's burials and women statues also indicate matrifocal societies. Women in Catal Huyuk and Hacilar were buried adorned and separate from men and children who were buried in clusters. The snake symbolism is part of the matrifocal spirituality, too. Snakes growing and shedding their skins were paired with women's monthly cycles. Agriculture, thought to have been the realm of women, was integral for the tribe's survival, and this, as well, gave women control over distribution of the food supply.

Religious power due to the unique association with the goddess was also women's. Cuneiform records from Sumer indicate that the women dominated the priestly hierarchy in sheer numbers.⁵¹ Some women actually lived in the temple complex which was the controlling agency for recording and distributing land and animals.

⁴⁸Stone 11-12.

⁴⁹Charlene Spretnak, introduction, *Politics of Women's Spirituality* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doublday, 1982) xii.

⁵⁰Binford 345.

⁵¹Getty 18.

Ritualistic and sacred sex as a means of raising spiritual energies⁵² may have been an activity carried on there, and the women involved were identified as sacred women; later, after patriarchy replaced Goddess worship, they were called temple prostitutes.⁵³

As a consequence of women's power in Goddess religion, some mythologies and rituals describe male roles as imitative of women's bodies. Castration is one such ritual that is part of mythological stories. In Greek mythology, the Titan Cronus castrated his father Uranus to take his place. In Hittite mythology, Kumarbi castrated reigning Anu. Isis, in Egyptian mythology, failed to find her husband Osiris' genitals when she attempted to piece together the dismembered parts of his body. According to Merlin Stone, there is evidence of voluntary castration of priests in Mother Goddess areas of Anatolia, Crete, Egypt, Rome and Mesopotamia.⁵⁴ Regicide, ritualistically and literally, may have been practiced, on kings who had fulfilled their function in sexually serving the Mother Goddess or her functionaries. In Hebrew law explained in Deuteronomy 23:1, a male without a penis cannot be a member of the congregation. "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." That may have been a way of separating those Hebrew men who worshiped Yahweh from those who worshiped the Goddess.⁵⁵ In addition, it is not unusual to find male groups, for example, aborigine groups in Africa as well as early Hebrews, which imitated

⁵²Fisher 38.

⁵³Stone 161.

⁵⁴Stone 150.

⁵⁵Stone 151.